

DATE REPEARED
ON PAGE A 14

NEW YORK TIMES
20 May, 1985

Getting an Earful From Soviet Radio Telephones

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, May 19 — About 25 years ago, the United States began eavesdropping on top officials of the Soviet Union in Moscow as they chatted with each other on their car telephones.

The electronic snooping went on for a number of years and, according to some accounts, produced useful information, such as signs that some leaders were seriously ill while other had drinking problems. But then word leaked out and the radio telephones of the Soviet leaders suddenly went silent. A short time later, the conversations resumed, only now the voices were scrambled.

Although the United States was aware its conversations could be monitored, too, this time it took no major steps to secure the car telephones of its own leaders. Officials were warned not to discuss confidential matters over the air, but it was not until early last year, at the insistence of President Reagan, that the 86 limousines used by top American officials in the capital got scramblers on their phones.

Now Nearly Complete

The installation, ordered under a top secret memorandum, National Security Decision 113, is now almost complete. In fact, even more sophisticated equipment has been ordered to replace the original.

In the interim, was any secret information compromised? And why the long delay for scramblers?

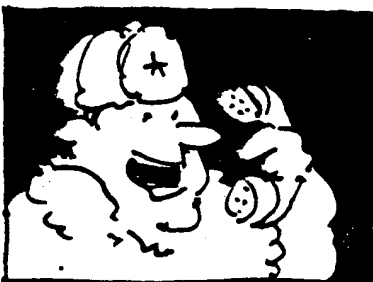
No officials will answer the first question. But whatever the case, Allen Henney, a Washington-area radio buff who is a member of the Radio Communications Monitoring Association, reports that most of what he now hears is scrambled.

"I used to hear a fair amount of chit-chat, some official telling his wife he wouldn't get home until late," said Mr. Henney, who spends many hours a week working his way through radio frequencies used by such agencies as the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Secret Service. "But beginning about a year ago," he added, "most of this stuff began to be scrambled."

Some Light on the Agency

As for the delay in installing scramblers in American limousines, the reasons offered provide a peephole into the secretive world of "sigint" or signals intelligence, and "comsec" or communications security. They also shed some light on the workings of the National Security Agency, a huge but largely invisible agency.

Intelligence and communications experts in the executive branch, Congress and outside of the Government



say the first and foremost reason for the installation delay was the way the National Security Agency was set up. Since 1951 it has had prime responsibility for collecting electronic intelligence from around the world and protecting the official communication links of the United States.

He Shifted to Other Half

"The N.S.A.," one Capitol Hill intelligence expert said, "is divided into two largely autonomous divisions that seldom have talked to each other. This has meant that the signal intelligence side focused all of its attention on listening while comsec has concentrated on such activities as developing secret codes, without giving much thought to other communication channels such as car radio telephones."

It may not be entirely coincidental that shortly after Walter G. Deelev became the head of Comsec in June 1983 that the National Security Agency greatly increased the its efforts to combat Soviet eavesdropping. Mr. Deelev is the first head of Comsec to have spent most of his professional career in Sigint.

A second reason for the delay may be technical. Although there has been a dramatic growth in the use of mobile telephones, the industry has paid little attention to developing an efficient way to protect the privacy of conversation on radio telephones.

"The N.S.A. could have installed a scrambling device on the President's mobile telephone before 1984, but it would have taken up a lot of space and was a pretty cumbersome to use," said one official. "With the cur-

rent technology, the equipment still is pretty bulky but we expect that, like all such electronic items, it will shrink a lot more."

End to Eavesdropping Sought

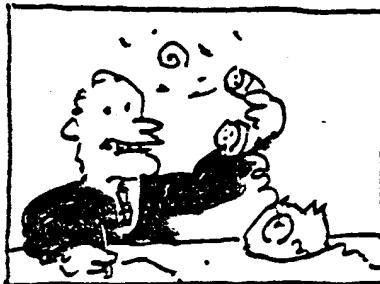
In fact, a few months ago the agency selected three major companies to begin producing a new family of small office and mobile telephones for under \$2,000 a instrument that the agency hopes will help end international and corporate eavesdropping. The agency would like to see the new phones in the offices of 500,000 Gov-

ernment officials and contractors as well as a million corporate executives in the next five years.

As for the eavesdropping on the Soviet leaders, according to several accounts, the first efforts to pick up their telephone conversations was apparently undertaken under a project with the code name of Gamma Gupy. The listening device was probably nothing more than an antenna on the roof of the United States Embassy. Later, according to intelligence experts, satellite listening devices were employed.

It is not known when or how the Russians first learned of the project. But a senior American intelligence official close to that particular project said a syndicated Jack Anderson newspaper column on the subject resulted in "all radios going dead" in the early 1970's. "When they came back on," the official added, "the conversations were encrypted."

While it is difficult, scrambled telephone conversations can sometimes be unscrambled by an eavesdropper. Presumably, both the Soviet Union and the United States now have such operations under way.



Drawings by Karl S. Clark